DELIVERANCE

January 14, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 53:1-7
John 1:29-34

**"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"**
-John 1:29b (RSV)

"I waited patiently for the Lord:
He inclined to me and heard my cry
He drew me up from the desolate pit,
out of a miry bog..."
[Psalm 40:2]

One of my favorite Garrison Keilor stories is about the Sunday morning Clarence Bunsen wasn't in church.

"Arlene went, but the mister stayed home, because he wasn't very thankful. He got up that morning and stepped on a screw and tried to levitate off it and strained his back. His back didn't go out but it felt weak. He didn't want to slip in the bathtub, so he took a bath instead of a shower, and felt like an old vet at the Vet's Hospital, and climbing out, he slipped and strained his back again, another part. While he was combing his hair, a clump came out, from the bunch he's been combing across the top in hopes it would take hold. He came down to the kitchen feeling that life has turned against him.

"Arlene said, 'Have a cup of coffee, that'll perk you up,' and usually that's all a Norwegian needs. Norwegians have often been revived by this method, including some whose EKG showed a flat line - a sip of coffee on their lips and the pen jumped. Clarence felt like coffee wouldn't make much difference.

"He didn't tell Arlene that he'd talked to daughter Barbara on the phone Wednesday night... he had a premonition that the real reason she was coming home... was to make an important announcement of her divorce." [Leaving Home, p. 160]

Clarence Bunsen's world is not very secure on Sunday morning. In fact, it's crumbling. He's getting older and is suddenly, painfully aware of it. Eternal youth, vigor, robustness, indestructiveness, are gone. Even coffee isn't going to help. And now, the relationship, which insures something of his own immortality, or at least his continuity, is in danger. His daughter's marriage is dissolving.

This is more than simply a bad morning. With a deft storyteller's touch, Keilor is talking about the Pit. We hold it at bay by carefully structured lives, by investing ourselves in relationships, professional ventures, personal travel and social activity, and sometimes in an interval or when one of the structures crumbles, or our body begins to fail us, or a clump of hair comes out, or a precious and permanent relationship is no longer permanent, but dissolves in front of our eyes, a divorce, a break, a death - there it is, the Pit.

John Dunne, a scholar/priest at Notre Dame has focused on the topic and says that sooner or later everybody asks, "Since I must die, how shall I satisfy my desire to live?" Father Dunne "noticed that the question comes in a new way to people in around the fourth decade of their life. Young people have probably been close to someone who died... they will have seen eighteen thousand violent deaths on television before they reach college age... but ritualized television death makes the reality easier to evade.

Dr. Martin Marty tells about it in a remarkable spiritual memoir, A Cry of Absence. "Father Dunne reports that somewhere around age twenty-nine or thirty, profound people pass to a new state of awareness. They appropriate the horizon that death creates... They have begun their new move toward autumn. Doors close, options narrow. They move from observing death at a distance to reckoning with its possibility at close hand." [p. 55, 57, 58]

One of those wonderful New Yorker cartoons this week shows a middle-aged man in a white shirt and tie, answering the door to confront the grim reaper, with his long black robe, scythe in hand. The man says, "Couldn't I do a couple hundred hours of community service instead?"

That's what's going on with Clarence Bunsen and, I believe that's what the Pit - the miry bog of Psalm 40 - is about.

"They move from observing death at a distance to reckoning with its possibility at close hand."

It leads to some pretty silly and sometimes very destructive human behavior:

It is behind an almost obsessive commitment to youthfulness in our culture, with billions of dollars invested in oils, creams, ointments, elixirs, spas, not to mention exercise equipment, and all the accouterments of our obsession. And while good health and fighting the clock and calendar are admirable activities, there is a sense in which it can and often does become unhealthy and dishonest. After all, is discovering the

way to prevent a man's hair from turning gray really one of the scientific breakthroughs of the past 2,000 years? Some of it is silly. And some is destructive, as, for instance, when we try to guarantee our security, our permanence, by building a kingdom professionally, financially, sexually, larger to assure us that we are not transient, that we will live forever. It is dangerous when a nation begins to think like that, i.e. that our future is guaranteed by military strength - even as the purchase of that strength is eroding the precious core of the nation - in poor education, poor health care, poor law enforcement, poor housing.

John saw Jesus one day and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world..."

The other dimension of the Pit - from which we need deliverance - is guilt... Sin., our oldest word for it, is the state of separation between God and ourselves - theologically: the state of alienation from our neighbors - sociologically: the state of separation from our own best selves and our awareness of it, our guilt - spiritually.

We have, it would seem, a universal capacity for guilt. We can feel guilty over silly inconsequentials: we can suffer from neurotic guilt; we can be made to feel guilty by parents, by our children, by authority figures, by ministers... I was reading the wonderful article in The New York Times Magazine this morning about the new style of museum exhibiting, featuring our own Museum of National History and the clever observation of Michael Spock, the new Vice President of Public Programs, that when a museum goer sees a display case containing thirty Eskimo fish hooks and finally walks away, what the viewer feels is guilt... There must be something wrong with him for not finding thirty fish hooks interesting!

Freud and friends know that guilt is real and what the Judeo/Christian tradition has always maintained is that there is a theological dimension to it; that it is a spiritual trap, and no matter how it is expressed, the resolution is ultimately spiritual. It may also be that there is a connection between our fear of death and our experience of guilt.

St. Paul pointed to it when he wrote, "The wages of sin is death." He might also have written that the wages of death is sin. Pride, self-centeredness, the absolute refusal to live within the limits of our humanity, our mortality, the desire - as old as Adam and Eve - to be God, to be eternal, infinite, is at the heart of what we mean by sin.

You see, the real trouble with us is that we know we will not live forever. Clarence sits in the bathtub with his bad back and knows it's not going to get any better, that he's not going to be young again. The trouble with us is that we know there is something out of sync, at the heart of things.

British theologian, J. S. Whale, put it eloquently:

"That human beings need to be reconciled to something: that there is a tragic disharmony in the human situation that cries to heaven itself for adjustment - this is the conviction to which the literature of the world

bears witness. Oedipus and King Lear are haunted by the same shadow." [Christian Doctrine, p. 74]

So, of course, is Clarence Bunsen, and so are we.

The Bible knows that about the human situation. There is probably nothing about our religion which we understand less, or are less interested in, than the sacrificial system of ancient Judaism. But, in fact, it was designed to deal with the basic human dilemma of guilt and the fear of death.

We assume that the Old Testament legal system, in the Book of Leviticus, for instance, contains the rules and regulations and procedures for correct sacrifices of doves, oxen, goats, lambs, because God is just and when people are bad, somebody has to be punished. We think it's a penal system based on retribution. When wrong is done the scales of justice are tipped and someone must pay in order to put them back in balance. An eye for an eye... but God will accept a substitute... That's what we think and it's a gross oversimplification... It's not what the ancient religion meant. So let's put aside our aesthetic objections for a moment and take a look.

Rather, the whole system is based on the understanding that human reconciliation, healing of the soul, happens only when God provides a way for it to happen. The life of the animal, in the sacrificial system, represents God's life. In the act of sacrifice, God is taking responsibility for the healing. God is paying the price.

We know the psychological truth of that, by the way. We know that when there is a break in a relationship, the person who has made the break, the guilty party, can feel regret, make restitution, promise never to do it again, spend a lifetime in remorse and guilt, without effecting healing. Healing happens, we know, only when the one offended somehow bears the pain, the responsibility, and extends forgiveness. Healing happens only as the injured party somehow voluntarily assumes responsibility. Perhaps that's why the experience is so rare.

Ordinarily we wait, smoldering in self-righteous indignation when we are wronged, violated, betrayed. "I don't know if I can ever forgive," one says. Or, "I can forgive but not forget," which means "I prefer not to forgive. I'm enjoying this too much."

The genius of Israel's religion was that it understood this about God. God is not an arrogant potentate whose good graces have to be earned and whose sense of justice had to be appeased by punishment of the offender, or at least a suitable substitute. Israel understood that God assumes the responsibility, the pain, the suffering, to make the relationship whole again. God is the way out of the Pit - the miry bog of guilt and fear.

In Walter Brueggemann's memorable phrase, Israel sees God as not simply an angry judge. The judge remembers to be a parent. God is a father in wistfulness, a mother in yearning.

And so one day at the beginning of the story, a strange but insightful man, a prophet actually, sees Jesus of Nazareth and says, "Behold, the Lamb of God." And what he is saying is that the creator of the human race is also the lover: the judge is also the parent: the resolution to the guilt we experience, the answer to the fear we feel is here, in this man, the Lamb of God.

And so, in the January doldrums, we are led by Scripture to a profound encounter with the basic claims of our faith. This faith of ours is not simply a pleasant moralistic system. This Gospel is a promise that the one who created us has acted to save us: that in loving and serving and following God's son - the Lamb of God - we can live as free men and women: free from guilt, free from despair, free from fear. For once you are right with God and know it, the Pit is not a threat.

"Behold the Lamb" he said. And I could not help but reflect, as I thought about preaching this sermon on this Sunday, after baptizing several babies, having read the lovely words of the ancient prophet:

> "He will feed his flock like a shepherd
> he will gather the lambs in his arms,
> he will carry them in his bosom
> and gently lead those that are with
> young."

That is, of course, what we believe is happening as we baptize these children and we make that affirmation publically and regularly because it reminds us that the promise is to us too. "Behold the Lambs."

"Clarence Bunsen rehearsed what he would say when his daughter told him the bad news of the death of the marriage... 'Well kids, that's your decision. I can't say that I approve, but I certainly can sympathize. Arlene and I have been together for forty years but there have been times...' Then she told him. She said, 'We have an announcement. We're going to have a baby in April.'

"He almost said, 'Well kids, that's your decision. I certainly can sympathize. Arlene I have been together for forty years but there have been times...' and then the happy news dawned on him and tears came to his eyes and he had to blow his nose."

Saved from despair, by a child. Pulled up out of the Pit by the baby. "Behold the Lamb of God."

And so, it was a moment like that - with all the reality of the human dilemma, all the broad sense of human yearning for healing and hope stuck in his throat, all the weight of human mortality which rests on the shoulders of every man and woman who thinks - that John saw Jesus and said something so important, so big and profound that finally you and I have to stop pushing and pulling at it, investigating, analyzing and explaining - and simply say it in wonder, and awe and love - with him.

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." Amen.